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Carter Ad Bends Rules As CIA, State Get Role

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PORTLAND, Maine — In a sharp break with traditional political practice, President Carter is using top officials of the State Department and the CIA as props in a television ad being shown in New England this week.

The ad, which runs less than five minutes, shows the president discussing a decision on aid to Nicaragua with Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher and CIA Director Stansfield Turner.

Neither Christopher or Turner is depicted making any partisan statements for Carter. Instead, the commercial is intended to convey a picture of the difficult decisions the president is obliged to make.

But the unwritten rule in politics has been that both the State Department and CIA, as well as Justice Department and Department of Defense, are kept entirely free of involvement in partisan politics. It has been acceptable for presidents to use the secretaries of such departments as Agriculture, Labor and Commerce as campaign surrogates, but that freedom has never applied to those dealing with the defense or foreign policy.

The ad is only one measure of the extent to which Carter is going to exploit the national security issue and the support he has evoked from the electorate on Iran and Afghanistan.

In Maine, Carter is also getting public backing and active campaigning from Kenneth Curtis, the ambassador to Canada — another break with normal political practice. Curtis, a former governor of the state, was traveling here yesterday with Vice President Walter Mondale, who defended the partisan activity by an ambassador. "He's entitled to do that," Mondale said at a news conference in Kittery. "He's a citizen of Maine and he's here on his own time."

In fact, the most visible example of the way Carter is exploiting the international situation is in Mondale's own campaigning for him. In appearance after appearance here over the last two days, the vice president has been stressing Carter's response on Afghanistan as a contrast between the kind of leadership he offers and that which might be provided by his opponents.

Thus, while the White House insists it is avoiding partisanship because of the international situation, the president's chief surrogate is boasting about Carter's conduct in the crisis as he seeks support for Carter against Sen. Edward Kennedy in the Maine Democratic caucuses next Sunday.

The body of Mondale's speech for Carter is just what it has been for months — praise for the administration's record in creating jobs, reforming the Social Security system, reducing the deficit, helping the cities and the like. Mondale also uses his own reputation as a Democratic liberal as a credential for Carter. Citing his own long association with Hubert Humphrey, Mondale tells one audience after another: "We've got a caring, compassionate president. . . I think I know a progressive when I see one."

But these days the piece de resistance of the Mondale pitch is that the Carter response to the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan is the reason he deserves support in the Democratic contest for the nomination. Mondale sets up straw men and then knocks them over. "The first thing we could do is start a war," the vice president told a meeting of supporters at Kittery. "The second thing we could do is send them a mean note — get the dictionary out and send them a real zinger."

Instead, Mondale argues, the president took a series of "tough steps" that have produced favorable results, including the release of the six hostages rescued by Canada and the U.N. resolution condemning the Soviet invasion.

Mondale says all of these steps Carter took — including the embargo on grain shipments and the move to cancel the Olympics — were "very controversial" and could have caused him grievous political harm.

There is inevitable applause when he adds: "I believe the American people support this strong leadership."

In fact, the steps Carter has taken now have been shown by the public opinion polls to have widespread backing among the voters. But Mondale and his advisers argue that they make a valid political point because both Kennedy and most of Carter's Republican opponents disagree with the president on most of the measures.